

be
active



eat
smart



HOW A MAJOR MEDICAL CENTER HELPED ITS OWN NEIGHBORHOOD GROW HEALTHY

June 2012



SHAPINGNJ

The State Partnership for Nutrition,
Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention



Office of Nutrition
and Fitness
(609) 292- 2209

HOW A MAJOR MEDICAL CENTER HELPED ITS OWN NEIGHBORHOOD GROW HEALTHY

New Jersey's Largest City and its Health Challenges

Newark is the largest city in New Jersey with a population of some 300,000 people. The city, made up of five wards, North, South, East, West and Central, is ethnically diverse and ranges greatly in character from ward to ward.

Industrial uses, coupled with Newark Liberty Airport and the Port of Newark, are concentrated in the East and South Wards, while residential neighborhoods exist primarily in the North, Central, and West.

Newark is also one of New Jersey's poorest cities: the 2010 Census showed that the median household income was \$35,659 and the median family income, \$41,684. That places about 25 % of Newark's population below the poverty line.

Although Newark is centrally located in the region with an extensive import and export industry moving food and food products through the port, its own residents lack fresh food. There are few large grocery stores in the city and corner stores in the residential neighborhoods are stocked with snacks and other foods high in fats, sugar and salt as well as soda and other sugary drinks, liquor and cigarettes. This limited access to fresh food combined with a lack of physical activity opportunities because of traffic and personal safety issues results in high rates of obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases for many residents of Newark. In fact, a study funded by the RWJF showed

that almost 45% of Newark's children ages 3 to 19 years old are overweight or obese.

This story tells how a local champion at a large medical center located in the Newark's South Ward reached out to her employer to gain support for a project to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to her fellow employees and neighborhood residents—many of whom are those same employees. In the process, she connected with an unusual local partner to accomplish her goal.

Over the course of two years, the medical center's efforts yielded not only a year-round farmers' market in the hospital lobby but also the first hospital-based farm in Essex County, developed specifically to bring neighborhood residents greater access to healthy foods.

A Large, Local Employer Provides Leadership in Solving a Newark Neighborhood's Health Challenges

In mid-2010, Stacy McCormack, from the New Jersey Department of Health's Office of Nutrition & Fitness, visited Beth Israel Medical Center in Newark because she had heard about the work the hospital was doing to tackle obesity. The Office of Nutrition & Fitness coordinates ***ShapingNJ***, a partnership of some 200 New Jersey organizations working to increase access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities and curb obesity across the state.

Beth Israel's Assistant Vice President of Wellness, Barbara Mintz, was running a number of obesity prevention and wellness programs for staff including The Beth

Challenge, a worksite wellness program where hospital employees contestants compete to lose weight.

A second initiative was KidsFit, a Merck Company Foundation- funded initiative in the local Maple Avenue School (kindergarten through eighth grade) that focuses on obesity prevention by providing a registered dietitian on site and after-school wellness and exercise programs.

During the visit, Mintz told McCormack about the lack of fresh food and its health consequences for people living in the South Ward. She told her visitor that she “would love to do a farmer’s market here at the hospital. Not only would it serve the community, but most of the employees here are locals. I just need to find a farmer willing to come to Newark!”

Finding a Farmer to Sell Produce in an Urban Neighborhood

As part of her job, McCormack brokers relationships among **ShapingNJ** partner organizations, bringing them together to accomplish goals of **ShapingNJ**. She decided to introduce Mintz to Lorraine Gibbons, executive director to the for-profit business Garden State Urban Farms. The business operates a hydroponic greenhouse that grows greens and herbs in Orange, NJ, a small city bordering Newark.

Since Mintz had found that it was often difficult for traditional, rural-based farmers to come to Newark and make any profit selling produce at a small market, an “urban farmer” seemed like the perfect match for her urban market. When Mintz and Gibbons

got together, the vision became clear: Gibbons would deliver fresh produce from Garden State's greenhouse along with other produce from another greenhouse nearby to Beth Israel Hospital. The hospital would organize a market set up in the lobby to sell the produce to their employees and the community. Eventually, Mintz and Gibbons hoped to figure out a way to have a garden on the hospital site.

Setting up the Market

Hospital staff is responsible for reserving space for the market in their lobby and setting up tables each Thursday from 1-4 p.m.. Mintz's staff places copies of healthy recipes, educational materials about healthy eating on the tables among the baskets of fruits and vegetables. Mintz and her colleagues publicize the market through flyers about market hours and location and on public information video monitors throughout the hospital. Garden State Urban Farms provides staff to the market as well as information about how and where the food was grown.



The market sells tomatoes, salad greens, kale, collards, potatoes, scallions, garlic, apples and herbs which customers can purchase with WIC and Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP) vouchers. Over time Mintz and Gibbons added other vendors including local olive oil producer Colavita and a local caterer selling homemade baked goods.

Based on the initial success of the market, after a few months, medical center leadership decided to dedicate an unused plot of their own land next to Maple Avenue School to grow food to sell at the market.

Creating a Hospital Garden

So the project entered its second phase: establishment of a farm at Beth Israel Hospital and engaging community members and school kids in growing the produce. Garden State Urban Farms created and operates the farm. Gibbons recommended the Earthbox® method of farming for this lot. Earthboxes are small container gardens designed for urban farming because they already contain clean soil and have an irrigation system that collects rainwater to help keep plants moist, minimizing the need for city water (each box costs about \$100.00). They are also easy to move indoors in the winter or relocate if an urban lot suddenly becomes unavailable for farming. In this case, since the lot was not officially designated for farming for the long term, the Earthboxes are an interim solution while the hospital works to find a more permanent location.



Teaching Neighborhood Kids about Growing and Eating Nutritious Food

Mintz saw another opportunity, this time to make sure that neighborhood residents really benefited from the healthy produce now available for sale in the neighborhood. “It is so important for the community to have access to healthy food,” said Mintz. “And, as a healthcare issue, we have to teach people how to eat better.”

So as part of KidsFit at The Maple Avenue School, Mintz encouraged the Beth Israel KidsFit team to use the farm to teach healthy lifestyles and reinforce the messages in the KidsFit lesson plans, which focus on the importance of healthy eating. Wellness

and Fitness Specialist Kerry Rossi teaches the students to read food labels, identify fruits and vegetables and taste new foods. “With the farm next door to the school we have the opportunity not only to teach the kids about the foods but also to experience growing food. The students are learning to start seeds in the classroom and then transplant them outside at the farm,” says Rossi. “We have events that teach them to have fun with food. We create food art, teach kids how to cook and eat.”

According to Rossi, the KidsFit Program really “empowers the students to take care of themselves and make healthy food choices on their own. I love hearing from the kids that they are eating the healthy option even after they leave the classroom. I’m not just testing their knowledge at the school; I am watching them change their daily behavior.”

Growing the Farm

As the hospital’s commitment to promoting a healthy community grew, they decided to take the farmer’s market outdoors during growing season, holding the market right at the garden. In late winter 2012 Beth Israel Medical Center and Garden State Urban Farms built a frame for a “vine classroom.” Gibbons predicts that the kids will sit under it and learn their lessons by this summer.

Garden State Urban Farms also built a small hoop house on site for starting seeds. The hoop house will extend the growing season until the hospital finds funding for a year-round greenhouse on a permanent hospital lot. The vision is for year-round production so the program can grow beyond the hospital lobby and begin to provide fresh food to

local corner stores.

Beth Israel Receives Acknowledgment for Its Healthy Leadership

In July 2011 Beth Israel Medical Center held a press event to officially open the farm and invited local elected officials, officials from the New Jersey health department, local students from the Maple Avenue School and community members.

Hospital and city officials acknowledged Mintz, Gibbons and their partners for their creative response to the urgent neighborhood issues of obesity and chronic disease. One state health department official noted that by “increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables, this community garden is helping residents to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

In early 2012 the New Jersey Hospital Association awarded Beth Israel Hospital the HRET Community Outreach Award for the garden, recognizing not only the garden’s providing fresh produce to the neighborhood, but also creating training and job opportunities for ex-offenders and developmentally disabled neighborhood residents.

And recognition keeps coming: in May 2012 Beth Israel Medical Center and Children’s Hospital of New Jersey received a \$4,000 grant from The Home Depot’s Community Impact Grant Program. That grant will be used to purchase tools, materials or services for the farm.

The farm has received recognition from the community as well. Over the past two years, seniors from the community who have come out to the farm have shared stories about food from their own countries and cultures with the students, farmers and hospital staff. This has helped Gibbons decide what to grow and stock for the farmers market. “I love to work in the dirt out here on the farm,” said Gibbons. “People in the community come by and tell me how much they enjoy the work going on. They really appreciate that we are here.”

Next Steps

Moving forward, Gibbons wants to find better ways to show the market’s clients that the business values them. For example, she wants to make the market more welcoming and easier to access. One current barrier is that community members need to pass through the security guard to access the lobby, and Gibbons senses could be intimidating to some community members. She is also hoping to find a way to document some of the senior’s stories about their experiences with food in their culture. Those stories can be shared with community members, hospital staff, students and market customers. This could begin to create a dialogue about food and what it means to individuals this community, their faith and their families.

Lessons Learned

Become a healthy eating champion within your own organization. One of the most important components of doing work “outside the box” of an organization’s traditional

mission is a local champion. Mintz is a champion of worksite and community wellness and has shepherded this project within the hospital.

Connect the work with your organization's core mission. This will allow the organization's leadership to see how working outside of their traditional setting or with nontraditional partners will advance their mission or enhance their work.

Maximize the potential assets you already have by engaging the diverse staff and numerous internal and external partners of a large institution. Write up your project ideas and share it with your supervisor, internal and external stakeholders, and staff. Seek out coworkers, community members and local leaders to who can participate in your project. Find allies in your board members and other staff members.

Look for underutilized assets in your organization that could be used for a project to benefit the community. This might include empty spaces inside your facility (i.e. empty lobbies or entry ways), vacant land or buildings that your organization owns or has access to.

Learn about the community that you want to serve. Learn about what community eats and what they are willing to pay for food. Find out what they need before you make all of the final decisions about your project. Often people in greatest need of fresh food also need to be able to purchase it through programs like Women Infant and Children (WIC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).